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ABSTRACT

During a review of counseling services within the Alberta Career Development and Employment Resource Center, a client profile procedure was developed to facilitate accuracy and quality in the identification of client needs during the initial interview. This paper describes this process of assessing the client and building a profile of his or her needs and concerns while simultaneously developing an effective counseling relationship. A review of current literature on the role of interview assessments in effective counseling establishes the need for pragmatic guidelines in developing a client profile. The conceptual framework of the client profile is designed to capture both the generic and more specific characteristics of the clients, and it follows a standard questionnaire format which nevertheless allows for more extensive exploration of clients' characteristics as appropriate. The paper concludes with a brief discussion of the response to date from practitioners who have used the profile. References are included.
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Development of A
Client Profile
As A Precursor to
Successful Vocational Counselling

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A major review of counselling services within Alberta Career Development and Employment was recently undertaken. An important component of this review was examination of the methods used to identify client needs. As a result of this examination, a process has been recommended to facilitate accuracy and quality in the identification of client needs. A cornerstone of this proposed process is the initial interview. It is critical for clients accessing Alberta Career Development and Employment counselling services that the counsellor gather both necessary and sufficient information to enable identification of needs and consequently appropriate assignment to services (eg., group counselling, individual counselling). Further, as this initial contact usually sets the tone for the client's involvement with our counselling services, the development of an effective counselling relationship with the client remains crucial. It is the challenge of assessing the client and building a profile of his/her needs and concerns, while simultaneously developing an effective counselling relationship, which is the basis of this paper.

The process begins in the first moments of contact with the client. It involves collecting and evaluating relevant information to be used as the basis for informed decision-making by the counsellor and client. This information gathering should be accomplished in a manner that is conducive to development of a positive rapport and an effective working relationship with the client.

Current literature also supports an emphasis upon the interview assessment as crucial to effective counselling. For example, Nelson-Jones (1983) acknowledges the important role that "assessment" plays in the initial interview process, observing that it facilitates an understanding of the client's needs and concerns. Berven (1984) also notes that the interview is perhaps one of the most widely utilized "assessment tools" used in counselling. It provides a rich source of client self-report data, and the opportunity to observe the client during the interaction. In addition, Berven suggests that the initial interview provides for a flexibility in the acquisition of information from the client that is often missing from more structured assessment methods such as standardized tests.

Although numerous checklists and structured formats are available for use in counselling, a primary weakness of many is that the interview often degenerates into a highly structured interaction. Thus the interaction tends to revolve around a question-answer format, with little opportunity for exploration beyond the checklist items. When such is the case, trust and open-communication may also be jeopardized. Under these circumstances it would appear that the instrument dictates the process rather than the process (and the uniqueness of the individual) determining how the instrument will be used. However, the response set of the structured interview can be somewhat seductive to the counsellor who is often pressed to obtain required information about the client within minimum timelines. This format would also permit the counsellor to have maximum control over the direction of the interview. As Hughes and May (1985) note, a virtue of the structured interview format is the control it gives the counsellor to concentrate on selected areas or issues which he or she considers important. Gibson and Mitchell (1986), in their discussion of the interview as an assessment technique in counselling caution that the more structured the interview format is, the more the interviewer "...must be flexible to alter both the nature and sequence of the questions as circumstances suggest." (p.261)

Thus the assessment aspect of the counselling process must walk the fine line between degenerating into a straight question and answer session where there are limited opportunities for development of an effective counselling relationship and that which is required to adequately identify client needs. It is important that information gathered be accurate, and as comprehensive as necessary. Results from the review of Alberta Career Development and Employment counselling services indicate there was a greater propensity for difficulties in counsellor decision-making when there are problems or gaps in the information gathering process. For example, when information is overlooked, inaccurate, or in some way inadequate, then inappropriate conclusions may result.

In view of the above, it is important to have pragmatic guidelines for development of a client profile. Because the counselling services offered by Alberta Career Development and Employment are of such a varied nature with the clientele representing a broad range of needs, a highly structured format for the interview assessment is considered impractical. Yet paradoxically, the multiplicity of services offered requires that some structure be afforded to the interview so as to permit effective evaluation of the client's concerns. It is within this context that the development of the "Client Profile" was brought forward. Initially developed for use with clients seeking vocational rehabilitation counselling, the profile has now been broadened to apply to a more diverse range of clients seeking vocational counselling services.

The genesis of the client profile stems from the need for necessary and sufficient information to facilitate the counselling process. This led to a conceptual framework which is based upon input from departmental counsellors, as well as feedback from program planning personnel and evaluation reviews. It is based upon the premise that when interaction with the client is flexible and allows for obtaining comprehensive information, an accurate profile of the client can be developed. This information can then be used to effectively assist that individual in making an informed vocational choice. In addition, the client profile when used as intended can be time and cost effective and enhance rather than complicate the counselling process. A sample of the profile is included in Appendix A.

It should be noted that the profile instrument is not intended for use as a structured form to be completed during a client interview. Rather, it is a conceptual framework from which a counsellor may operate during the interview process. The profile may be useful for staff training purposes. It may be particularly useful to new counsellors while also serving to cue or remind more experienced counsellors regarding the need to explore certain background information and characteristics of the client. In addition, the profile may be useful in a variety of counselling settings because it allows for flexibility regarding

both client characteristics and the various service delivery mandates of counselling organizations.

Much of the information contained in the profile is the type that is generally required in most vocational counselling settings. However, as is indicated in the literature, common information is on occasion overlooked or simply not recorded in counselling sessions. Farley (1983) for example, cited research indicating that rehabilitation counsellors typically collected less than one third of the information deemed important during the intake interview, and further, disseminated less than one fifth of the information deemed important to the client. The causes for these omissions or failures to focus on particular aspects of the client's situation are no doubt varied. These can range from a discomfort with the client (ie., the aggressive or psychiatrically disabled client), the presenting issue, or simply failure to identify a specific factor as relevant. However, counsellor omissions or oversights of this nature during the initial evaluation process can lead to serious consequences. Because information gathered is intended to provide direction in terms of services the individual may require, an inadequate recording of data may result in premature or inappropriate assignment to services. This can result in frustration for the client, financial loss to the counselling agency, and misuse of client and counsellor time.

From an organizational perspective, several aspects of case management can be seriously impaired or compromised if a clear picture of the client is not developed during the initial interview process. This is particularly true in cases where program eligibility or vocational rehabilitation considerations are important. Phillips and Pool (1984) cite potential difficulties in areas such as:

- a) determining eligibility for vocational rehabilitation services;
 - b) rehabilitation plan development;
 - c) identification of needed work adjustment training;
 - d) placement in suitable occupations.
- Often, the information necessary for evaluation of program considerations does not surface "naturally" in the course of the counselling process. Information regarding medical status, previous assessments, previous program involvement, other agency involvements et cetera, may or may not be

raised in the course of the counselling session. Failure to examine these factors can be serious, with a number of consequences including: duplication of services, inadequate or inappropriate assessment, inappropriate placement, or (more often) a poor career or vocational decision, with all the subsequent risks of client dissatisfaction or failure.

It is also important to recognize that information obtained from the interview arises from a complex interaction between counsellor and client. Berven (1984) outlined several potential aspects which suggest caution with the interview assessment, including:

- 1) subjectivity on the part of the counsellor;
- 2) bias in client's responses to the manner in which the counsellor's questions or inquiries are posed;
- 3) intentional or unintentional distortions in the client's self report; and

4) effects of the client-counsellor relationship on the openness and honesty in client communication. In order to limit the effects of such factors, the interviewing counsellor must be aware of the need to explore any aspects which may impact upon the individual's plans and future vocational decisions. In view of the scope of issues that can arise in the initial interview, it is important that counsellors have at their disposal some means to remind or cue themselves regarding critical points. The profile was designed with a view to assisting counsellors in the interview assessment process while not restricting or overly structuring the interaction.

In examining these issues, the question of counsellor training arises. Questions were raised as to whether a training program for counsellors would ensure that intake interviews were sufficiently comprehensive. While acknowledging the importance of adequate interviewing skills for all counsellors, it was observed that the complexity and variety of the issues presented in the intake interviews may cause even experienced and highly trained counsellors to miss critical points. Further training may or may not result in appreciable improvements. Farley (1983), Pape, and Berven (1983), in their examinations of the effects of training on initial interview skills, indicated that there are

mixed reviews in the literature as to the longevity and effectiveness of training counsellors in specific skills for the initial interview. Training, while important, is only part of the solution.

The profile is, in essence, a screening inventory to identify gaps in information. As the counsellor uses the profile, he or she will become increasingly aware of those areas which require further elaboration. With identification of the gaps in information and other inconsistencies in the client's self-report data, it should also be much easier to identify when there is a need for further documentation or a referral for specialized testing assessment or other consultation.

As indicated previously, development of the Client Profile stems from the mandate to accurately identify client needs and provide the best possible counselling services. Partly because the presenting issues and needs of the counselling clients of Alberta Career Development and Employment are so diverse, the conceptual framework for the development of a client profile is designed to capture both the generic and more specific characteristics of our clients. The profile is intended to guide the information process in a flexible and comprehensive manner, allowing for more extensive exploration of client characteristics as appropriate. The format of the Client Profile is currently in a standard questionnaire format, with spaces to write in the required information (usually undertaken after the interview). The profile is intended to be used as a cue or reminder during the interview, rather than something the counsellor reads and the client responds to. Although other formats are possible, the current usage permits easy integration of the document into standard record keeping systems, and permits use of the profile as an easily accessible method of recording the information obtained in the initial interview. Currently, research and development activities are underway utilizing a derivation of the Client Profile concept in a computerized format.

The development of the Client Profile is seen as a step towards the development of systems which facilitate effective identification of client concerns and needs while simultaneously permitting a sufficient

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degree of flexibility in the course of the interview. The response to date from the field practitioners who are piloting the use of the profile has been generally positive. Experience in referrals for assessment indicates that consulting professionals (eg., psychologists, occupational therapists, et cetera) generally request the type of information included in the profile as background data prior to testing. In addition, similarities have been seen in the information obtained in the profile and that required by different government programs, possibly indicating a considerable degree of transferability among various organizational settings. Active research and piloting of the profile continues, focussing on refinement of the content and its application in a variety of settings.

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APPENDIX A

CLIENT PROFILE

File No.

Date:

Counsellor/Interviewer:

Client's Full Name:

Address:

Residence Telephone Number:

Other contact number(s):

Client's birth date:

Age:

Gender:

Social Insurance Number:

Length of time residing in province:

EMPLOYMENT STATUS AND HISTORY

If currently employed:

Number of hours per week:

Occupation:

Duties:

Place of employment:

Previous Employment(relevant labour force involvement over the previous ten years) starting with most recent occupation and duties). Please indicate whether this was full time or part time and period of employment as well as the reason for learning in each instance.

What is this individual's usual occupation? If this differs from current employment, please explain to.

Have there been any modifications to the work-site to assist this individual in maintaining employment? (If so, describe)

Has this individual attempted alternative occupations since the illness/injury? (If yes, describe duties, outcome)

ACADEMIC STATUS AND HISTORY

If currently involved with further education:

Name and Location of Institution:

Program of studies:

Number of courses:

Date started:

Anticipated year of completion:

Prior Academic Achievement:

Highest level achieved:

Type of program:

Year completed:

Name and Location of Educational Institution:

CLIENT'S INITIAL PURPOSE AND GOALS RELEVANT TO REHABILITATION

1. Assistance with resume/job search
2. Information pertaining to a specific occupation
3. Job interview skills
4. Dissatisfaction with current or most recent occupation, wants to change vocation
5. Assistance in deciding upon an educational program
6. Assistance in deciding about alternative occupations, unable to continue with current or most recent occupation
7. Funding assistance to participate in a training program
8. Information regarding vocational rehabilitation services
9. Assistance in identifying strengths, limitations, and potential relevant to alternative occupations
10. Assistance in determining appropriateness of occupational goal

CLIENT REFERRAL BY EXTERNAL AGENT

Reason given:

Name and telephone number of referring agent:

INDICATIONS OF PRIOR AND CURRENT INVOLVEMENT WITH EXTERNAL AGENT
(GOVERNMENT DEPARTMENT OR COMMUNITY AGENCY)

- Name and telephone number of agent
- Most recent period of involvements
- Services Provided which may be relevant to the rehabilitation process (e.g. testing, counselling, medical evaluation, legal services, financial support).

DISABILITY SUMMARY

- Disability(s) as indicated by physician:
- Impairment(s) indicated:
- Vocational handicap(s):
- Current medications:
- Current therapy:
- Other mental or physical health concerns:

Note: does documentation include i.e. medical reports (including radiology, pathology summaries and hospital discharge summary)

EMPLOYMENT CONSIDERATIONS

- Current source of financial support:
- Employment which this individual appears best qualified for by education or experience:
- If disabled, identify residual employment related skills:
- Employment options considered:

EMPLOYMENT READINESS

- No apparent barriers to competitive employment in usual occupation
- Appears to require re-training or job-site modifications
- Not considered capable of competitive employment at this time, referred to (specify)
- Disability not work related, referred to (specify)

TESTING AND EVALUATION REQUIRED

Physical functioning	Academic achievement level
Work-site assessment	Personality
Interests	Intellectual
Psycho-educational	Occupational performance
Neuro-psychological	Vocational awareness

POTENTIAL AVENUES FOR CLIENT ASSISTANCE

- Assessment
- Individual counselling
- Workshop
- Job search
- Referral to other agency (specify and give reason)
- Clarification of eligibility/suitability for services offered by your agency
- Work Adjustment Training
- Modifications to the work site
- Provision of Assistive Device(s) and training

CLIENT'S GOALS

- Immediate/short term
- Requirements to achieve goals
- Long term
- Requirements to achieve goal(s)

COUNSELLOR/INTERVIEWER'S OBSERVATIONS AND IMPRESSION

CLIENT PROFILE

DATE YY MM DD	AGENCY	CONTACT/COUNSELLOR	PHONE
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A

CLIENT'S SURNAME		FIRST	INITIAL
ADDRESS		CITY	POSTAL CODE
LENGTH OF TIME RESIDING IN PROVINCE	AGE	SEX	PHONE: RESIDENCE
			PHONE Business/Other

CLIENT EMPLOYMENT STATUS

B

CURRENTLY EMPLOYED? If "YES", Number of hours per week?

☐ YES ☐ NO

CURRENT EMPLOYER	OCCUPATION
PREVIOUS EMPLOYER MOST RECENT	OCCUPATION
	FROM TO
	YEAR MON. DAY YEAR MON. DAY

CLIENT ACADEMIC STATUS

C

CURRENTLY ATTENDING SCHOOL? INSTITUTION

☐ YES ☐ NO

HIGHEST GRADE COMPLETED YEAR INSTITUTION

TYPE OF EDUCATION PROGRAM

CLIENT'S STATED PURPOSE IN ACCESSING (Your Agency)

D

	YES	NO		YES	NO
1. Assistance with resume/job search			6. Funding or assistance to participate in training		
2. Information pertaining to specific occupation			7. Information regarding employment creation programs and training		
3. Job interview skills			8. Assistance in determining appropriateness of occupational goal		
4. Dissatisfaction with current career			9. Assistance in identifying strengths, limitations relevant to occupational planning		
5. Assistance deciding upon an educational program			10. Assistance in accessing vocational rehabilitation services		
11. OTHER: (Please Specify)					

OTHER AGENCIES and PROFESSIONALS INVOLVED in ASSESSMENT/COUNSELLING/FINANCIAL ASSISTANCE and TREATMENT

E

☐ SOCIAL SERVICES ☐ CEC ☐ WCB ☐ MENTAL HEALTH SERVICES ☐ DISABILITY PENSION PROGRAM ☐ MEDICAL PRACTITIONER ☐ OTHER: (Specify)

NAMES AND TELEPHONE NUMBERS OF CONTACT PERSONS FROM AGENCIES INDICATED ABOVE

CLIENT REFERRAL TO (Your Agency) BY ANOTHER AGENCY or PROFESSIONAL

F

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HEALTH HISTORY (Self Report)

G	1. STATED PHYSICAL ILLNESS(ES)	2. IMPAIRMENT(S) INDICATED	3. VOCATIONAL HANDICAP(S)	YEAR OF ONSET
	2. MENTAL HEALTH CONCERNS/DIAGNOSIS (If Known)			YEAR OF ONSET
				☐ TEMPORARY ☐ CHRONIC
	3. INTELLECTUAL IMPAIRMENTS PREVIOUSLY DIAGNOSED OR CURRENTLY SUSPECTED:			YEAR DIAGNOSED
	4. CURRENT MEDICATIONS:		5. CURRENT THERAPY (eg., physio therapy, psych therapy?)	
	6. HOSPITALIZATIONS	YEAR	REASONS	NAME OF HOSPITAL

CURRENT SOURCES of FINANCIAL SUPPORT

H	☐ W.C.B.	☐ U.I.C.	☐ L.T.D.I.	☐ DISABILITY PENSION	☐ S.F.B.	☐ SOCIAL ASSISTANCE	☐ LITIGATION	☐ OTHER
Has client had previous involvement with any of the above? ☐ YES ☐ NO (Specify)								

EMPLOYMENT CONSIDERATIONS

I	1. Employment for which person appears best qualified by education or experience
	2. If disabled, list residual employment related skills
	3. Employment options considered

EMPLOYMENT READINESS

J	☐ No obvious barriers to competitive employment.	☐ Appears to require re-training or job site modifications.
	☐ Not considered capable of competitive employment at this time.	REFERRED TO:

POTENTIAL AVENUES for CLIENT ASSISTANCE

K	☐ WORKSHOP
	☐ INDIVIDUAL COUNSELLING
	☐ JOB SEARCH
	☐ REFERRAL TO OTHER AGENCY: SPECIFY REASON
	☐ Clarification of eligibility/suitability for services (offered by your agency)

REQUIRED DOCUMENTATION

☐ CONSENT TO RELEASE INFORMATION	☐ TRANSCRIPT	☐ PREVIOUS TEST REPORTS	☐ MEDICAL REPORT	☐ HOSPITAL REPORT	☐ OTHER SPECIFY
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EVALUATION AND TESTING REQUIRED

☐ INTERESTS	☐ PHYSICAL FUNCTIONING	☐ ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT LEVEL	☐ WORK-SITE	☐ PERSONALITY
☐ NEURO-PSYCHOLOGICAL	☐ OCCUPATIONAL PERFORMANCE	☐ INTELLECTUAL	☐ PSYCHO-EDUCATIONAL	☐ OTHER

CLIENT'S GOALS

L	1. IMMEDIATE/SHORT TERM	REQUIREMENTS TO ACHIEVE GOAL
	2. LONG-TERM	REQUIREMENTS TO ACHIEVE GOAL